

merely had a "smell." The others, U.S. News said,

"He sweeps away decades of polemical smoke, layer by layer, and builds an unshakable case against JFK's killer," U.S. News said of Posner.

"It's just a model of historical scholarship," said Stephen Ambrose, the Boyd Professor of History at the University of New Orleans, and noted student of assassination literature, who says the book has changed his mind. He said that until this book, he had entertained the possibility of a conspiracy because of doubts about the single-bullet theory. He says Posner has convinced him that a single bullet hit both Kennedy and Connally, and that Oswald acted alone.

But will "Case Closed" change the American mind? Critics — and there are many — say that Posner, a former Manhattan attorney, ignored important evidence in an effort to build a prosecutorial indictment of the realm of conspiracy theories.

Probably the most widely respected believer in the possibility of a JFK conspiracy — former House Select Committee on Assassinations counsel G. Robert Blakey — said Posner's book, rather than having a real impact, would end up as a mere "footnote" in a bibliography of assassination literature.

"What's troublesome for me in Posner's book is that he's a lawyer writing the brief for one side, and there's no reason for a person who's seen or heard all the evidence to credit his book as opposed to someone else's," said Blakey, a University of Notre Dame law professor.

"I think Lee Harvey Oswald fired two shots from behind that killed the president of the United States beyond a reasonable doubt," Blakey said. "But I think there is substantial evidence to believe both the ear- and the eye-witnesses that there was another shot in the plaza.

"I think a reasonable person can agree with me," Blakey added. "I'm not so arrogant as to say, 'Case Closed.'"

"Case Closed" essentially is a straightforward narration of how Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, came to kill Kennedy. The conclusion, though arrived at more artfully, is precisely that of the Warren Commission, which endured both contemporary and subsequent derision for not seeing a conspiracy.

But there are some new twists.

Posner produced one the old-fashioned way: By creating his own index of the Warren Commission report, he found what he says is information about Oswald that others have missed or ignored.

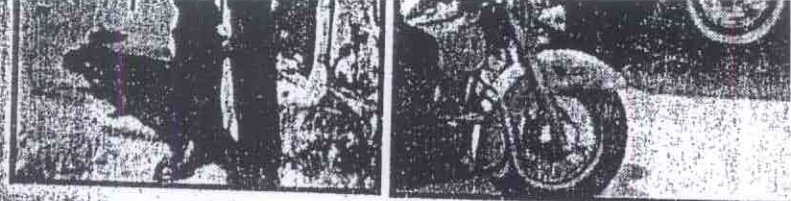
"I thought that unless I obtained an understanding of Oswald, you still don't understand why he shoots Jack Kennedy," Posner said. "To me, that is a fundamental flaw in the Warren Commission and in every other book that said Oswald did it."

For three years, Posner's apartment on East 54th Street, already filled with mementos of previous books on subjects ranging from Nazi doctor Josef Mengele to the Chinese mobsters, became a repository of cardboard file boxes. Marking off the thousands of hand-written index cards were divider headings such as, "Brain"; "Ballistics"; "Fingerprints," and "Mystery Secret Service Men."

The indexing enabled Posner to build the case that Oswald was no "patsy," but instead troubled and increasingly violent as he grew up. Indeed, Posner devotes about half the book to what amounts to a compelling new biography of the alleged assassin. The footnotes show that much of the telling detail in Oswald's life story comes straight out of commission records which have been available to anyone for 30 years.

Typical of the biographical section is a long-buried

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Lee Harvey Oswald with Mannlicher-Carcano rifle, above, in a photo some contend was motorcade in Oliver Stone's film, 'JFK.'

The Plot's the I

BY FRED BRUNING

STAFF WRITER

THE ASSASSINATION of John F. Kennedy and attendant whodunit theories have done much to define the last quarter of this American century — the killing of a beloved president because his loss represented to millions the sudden snatching away of hope, and the conspiracy arguments because they revealed a powerful skepticism straining at the national psyche.

By the time the Warren Commission declared in 1964 that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in slaying Kennedy the previous year, polls showed that a third of Americans believed instead that Oswald was only a player in someone's diabolical game. The number hit 60 percent in 1966 and continued climbing. When pollsters questioned Americans following the controversial 1991 movie, "JFK," 77 percent said they had no doubt: Kennedy was the victim of a conspiracy.

It was as though Kennedy's death had inspired a new religion — an orthodoxy of disbelief. "The theories really ran around the country like wildfire," recalled Ramsey Clark, who served as U.S. attorney general from 1967-69. "It was hard to go to a college campus and not find a dozen or so young people who would come up very agitated, presenting all kinds of theories." Seeing that Clark wasn't buying, students seemed incredulous. "They would walk away shaking their heads," he said.

In his book, "Case Closed," Gerald Posner says Americans embraced alternative explanations to the Kennedy killing because the event simply seemed too painful for the work of a "misguided sociopath" like Lee Oswald. Accepting the president's death was difficult enough. Accepting the banality of his assassin was asking too much.

William Manchester, now professor of history emeritus at Wesleyan University, investigated the Kennedy killing in preparation for his 1967 book, "The Death of a President," and agreed that an "aesthetic principle" is behind the American yearning for conspiracy explanations.

"If you put the murder of six million Jews in World War II on one side of the scale and, on the other side of the scale, the Nazis — the greatest band of criminals ever to seize control of a state — there is a balance: the greatest crime, the greatest criminals," Manchester said in a telephone interview. "But if you put the assassination of Kennedy on one side and that wretched wail Oswald on the other, it doesn't balance."

Through the years, many Americans have been enticed by conspiracy buffs — a huge number of theorists from Mark Lane to Oliver Stone, director of "JFK." Stone's riveting — but heavily criticized — film argued that Kennedy was targeted by an extraordinary ensemble of evildoers lurking within govern-

ment and beyond. As it debates churning for an "JFK" to young search for truth march.

Because the Warren centerpiece of the estal argument, Stone will "march" for truth will

"What made us [Ar conspiracy theories was report was woefully, we than Vankin, author of Cover-ups and Crimes Mind Control in Ameri

Vankin says the Warri safest, most politically you see that, you have ing on," said the authc Oswald was merely one

Though he rejects Guthman, press secrets the president's brother says most Americans he reasonable "skepticism sassination. "There has Guthman, now a journa

Others note that Ame brace conspiracy expl whose history is replet some of it murderous. A eager for the outlandish the Super Bowl, or wor the White House, or, ir Jack Kennedy's death with Lee Harvey Oswald

"People would rather, than the simple answer California psychotherapi tems. He cited polls indi U. S. citizens believe in communicate with the de cans in general are prett

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With his fiercely resear hopes to lead the nation ba regarding the Kennedy kil have flourished for 30 year constituency. Will "Case the Kennedy assassinati Posner, "may be too muc

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